

## applying strengthening families to child welfare practice

From birth throughout their first years of life, young children are developing physically, socially, and emotionally at an astonishing rate, and key brain circuitry is being formed. These early years have a tremendous impact on outcomes for children throughout their lives.

Unfortunately, children ages zero to five are also far more likely to be victims of abuse or neglect than older children, and the effects can be devastating. Trauma that occurs early in life can dramatically disrupt development. Children who have experienced abuse or neglect need special attention to their developmental needs.

**Strengthening Families offers a framework for practice with children and families that can help child welfare caseworkers attend to the developmental needs of the youngest children in the system.** By integrating attention to the Protective Factors into child welfare practice, practitioners can help families (birth, foster, kinship, or adoptive) build their capacity to care for young children and work towards meeting the safety, permanency, and well being goals for children in care.

### WHY APPLY STRENGTHENING FAMILIES TO CHILD WELFARE?

- Children zero to five are the fastest growing group entering the child welfare system. The trauma of abuse, removal from their home, and even reunification with their birth family can disrupt their development and have harmful, long-term effects. Strengthening Families helps child welfare workers ensure that children's development stays on track during involvement with the system.
- When children in early care and education settings have experienced abuse or neglect, staff caring for these children need guidance and support. Strengthening Families helps child welfare practitioners partner with other service providers to meet the needs of young children.
- Stability for children is largely promoted through stability of the families who care for them. Whether the family is a birth family, a foster family, a kinship family, or an adoptive family it is likely that the experience of child welfare engagement and caring for a child who has experienced trauma creates stress. Strengthening Families provides a framework for concrete activities to promote the well-being of all child welfare families.
- Building partnerships between early childhood and child welfare can help engage a community partner with day-to-day contact with the child, an eye to changes in behavior that can indicate something is wrong, and a strong relationship that can provide continuity through what can be a chaotic and disruptive time.

### PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Five Protective Factors are the foundation of the Strengthening Families approach. Research indicates that when these factors are present and robust in a family, the likelihood of abuse and neglect diminish. The Protective Factors are:

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Supports in Times of Need
- Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Professionals in early childhood, family support, child welfare, and a variety of other sectors can make small but significant changes in their day to day work to build these Protective Factors in families.

# strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

## RESOURCES

The Strengthening Families state pilots produced an extensive library of resources about using a Protective Factors framework in child welfare practice and linking child welfare and early childhood systems. These include:

- Handouts for child welfare workers on partnering with early learning programs
- Papers describing the how different states started using Strengthening Families in child welfare practice
- Important research about the impact of trauma and toxic stress on young children
- Tools and materials for child welfare practice that incorporate the Protective Factors

## STRATEGIES FOR APPLYING STRENGTHENING FAMILIES TO CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

During a two-year pilot of Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education, seven states explored strategies for building linkages between early childhood and child welfare systems as part of their initiatives. Next, three of these states worked to deepen their efforts in this area. Successful strategies include:

### Support local collaboration between early care and education and child welfare on the ground

- Local child abuse councils incorporate early care and education programs, especially Head Start community liaisons
- Early care and education programs doing Strengthening Families contract to work with TANF and child welfare agencies, and designated liaisons support connections between caseworkers and early childhood programs.

### Educate and build capacity of child welfare workers and resource families

- Protective Factors are embedded into foundational pre-service and in-service training for child welfare workers, as well as pre-service and in-service training for foster parents and kinship resource families
- Training on child development and the impact of trauma on optimal development for children under 5 is required for all child welfare workers and resource families (including social and emotional development and readiness to learn)
- These trainings and support parameters are also required of purchase of service agencies serving as surrogates for child welfare agencies

### Integrate the Protective Factors into case practice tools

- Integrated assessments and family team meetings for young children include early care and education representatives
- Multi-disciplinary staffings, early intervention and mental health assessments, and placement determination meetings for young children include early care and education representatives
- The Protective Factors Framework is used to build common practice approaches across a coordinated service system with multiple service modalities

### Integrate Strengthening Families and the Protective Factors into system-change efforts

- The framework is included or considered in Child and Family Service Reviews, Quality Service Reviews, Program Improvement Plans, etc.
- Rule changes are made to require that young children in custody of the child welfare system be placed in a quality early care and education setting
- Capacity building around the Protective Factors is built into all differential response programs and contracts
- Strengthening Families strategies and the Protective Factors are incorporated into Family Resource Center protocols